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Archaeological Museum Vaishali : A Peep into the Past

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Archaeological Survey of India, the main custodian of the India's vast heritage and cultural remains, initiated the creation of site museums in the beginning of the twentieth century. The main object of site museums is to preserve and display small and movable antiquities recovered from the ancient sites in close association with the remains. These objects are appropriately displayed at the very site with their cultural context. At present there are 45 site museums established by Archaeological Survey of India. In Bihar, A.S.I. set up Archaeological Museum at Nalanda in the year 1917, Bodhgaya in 1956, Vaishali in 1971 and Vikramshila in 2004.

History of Vaishali museum is also very interesting. It is the result of a small surface collection of antiquities by a local gentle man late Bijali Singh of village Chakramdas[1]. The collection of antiquities was displayed during the first Vaishali festival on 31 March to 1 April 1945 with the foundation of Vaishali Sangha and the collection of antiquities was taken over by the Sangha[2]. Further Vaishali Sangha with the help of Government of Bihar constructed a small building and housed of the above collection[3]. From time to time antiquities and other exhibits have been added to the collection of museum. A care taker also trained at the Patna Museum at the expense of the Sangha and he became in charge of it[4]. It was administrated by a managing committee nominated by Vaishali Sangha[5]. With the establishment of present museum by the

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Archaeological Survey of India, all the antiquities were donated to it by the Vaishali Sangha. In addition, the antiquities found in course of explorations and excavations of adjoining sites by different agencies over a long span of time are also housed in this museum. The construction of building was completed in 1967 but it was opened for the public in 1971.

Vaishali was one of the oldest and largest cities of India with an immense wealth of rich traditions and legends since epic period. According to Ramayana Ikshvaku queen Alambusha had a son named Vishala who founded the city and named it Vishalapuri[6]. According to Balmiki Ramayana Sumati was ruling at Vaishali when Lord Rama visited the place enroute to Mithila for his marriage[7]. Jain Tirthankar Mahavira was believed to be born at Kundagram in Vaishali, at present represented by the modern village Vasukund[8]. However, Vaishali is best known for its association with Buddha and Buddhism. Vaishali was highly regarded due to its association with the life events of the Buddha, such as here was the site of *kutagarshala* where Buddha used to stay during his visit to Vaishali. It was also the site where Buddha permitted the ladies to enter into the Buddhist *Sangha*. This place is also associated with one of the miracle of Lord Buddha in which the monkey king offered him a bowl of honey. It stood on the royal ancient road leading from Pataliputra to Lumbini.

The ruins of ancient city Vaishali at present falling under the jurisdiction of two districts of north Bihar viz. Vaishali and Muzaffarpur, it covers a vast area represented by modern villages of Kolhua, Basukund, Basarh, Kamman Chhapra, Lalpura, Baniya, Manikpur and Bakhara etc. This area was under the confederacy of Vajji with its capital of Vaishali. Vaishali is well connected by road. It is about 60 km north from Patna and 40 km from Hajipur. Various archaeological excavation carried out by A.S.I. and other agencies and ancient remains from N.B.P. period to Post Gupta period has been unearthed in various locations in the ancient Vaishali region.

Archaeological museum Vaishali situated on the northern embankment of historical Abhishek Puskarni, presently known as *Kharauna Pokhar* . The Vaishali Museum was established by Archaeological Survey of India in 1971 to preserve and display the antiquities found during exploration and excavation of sites associated with the ancient Vaishali. The museum faces to the east. It consists of four galleries around a central courtyard. The museum possesses about two thousand antiquities of which 569 are in display. The antiquities belong to different periods stretching from 600 B.C. to 1200 A.D. and throw significant light on the history of Maurya, Sunga, Kushan, Gupta and early medieval cultures.

The gallery No. 1, approached through the main entrance, is the key gallery of this museum. It displays a large fiber glass scale model of Kolhua site which was excavated during 1989-1999 and emerged as the most revealing structural site of ancient Vaishali. The most remarkable display of this gallery is a sculpture of crowned Buddha in black basalt, datable to Pala period (9^{th} -10^{th} Century AD). It is shown wearing necklace, earring and other ornaments, seated cross legged over double petalled lotus in *bhumisparsh mudra* under the Bodhi tree representing the enlightenment.

The other attraction of this gallery is a headless sculpture in black basalt of Buddha, also in *bhumisparsh mudra*, on the pedestal of which is shown a monkey offering bowl with honey to Buddha representing the event of "Vaishali Miracle". Another important sculpture is a small votive stupa of black basalt. On its four cardinal directions, Buddha in different postures are carved within niches. In this gallery a *chaturmukha-sivalinga* of black basalt and a door jamb having three *dwarshakhas* are also displayed. The rich collection of terracotta human figurines, represented by bust and torso of male and female are also attracting the visitors which includes mother goddess, mother and child, naigamesh and *simhavahini* Durga. Simha vahini Durga made of terracotta assignable to Gupta period seated on the lion in lalitasana pose. Four armed goddess decked with crown, necklace, armlets, bangles and waist girdle. He is holding shield and trident (broken) in her left hands and sword (broken) in upper right hand while her lower right showing varada mudra. A notable terracotta plaque datable to post Gupta period showing Buddha in standing *tribhaga* posture clad in *sanghati* displaying *abhaya mudra* by his left hand and he is holding the end of *sanghati* with his right. A human figure holding a pole or royal parasol above the Buddha is on right side. A kneeling human figure with folded hands is showing left side of plaque.

The unique collection of moulded bricks and brick tiles are also exhibited in this gallery. Moulded bricks were used to build viharas, temples and votive stupas in ranging from Kushana to post Gupta period near Ashokan pillar Kolhua. These bricks are rectangular and circular in shape, decoration with floral or geometric designs. Two interesting brick bats recovered from Kolhua excavation in 1976-77 also displayed in the museum. The uniqueness of these brick bats is that semiprecious stones are embedded in these brick bats for enhancing the beauty of bricks. On one of the brick tiles a beautiful female head is carved with a very fine delineation of features like eyes, nose and lips which enliven the image. The head dress, hair band and ear lobes are well depicted. In another brick tile crowned and well decked Bodhisattva depicting in sitting pose. His one hand is displaying *abhaya mudra* and another hand resting on his slightly raised knee. A circular halo is also shown behind his head. A head of human figure in veneration attitude is also shown on upper part of brick tile. On stylistic ground both brick tiles may be arranged to early Pala period with legacy of Gupta idioms. These bricks and brick tiles are the parameters of artistry of the artisans of Vaishali, their innovative skill and attitude towards their profession.

While moving clockwise the visitors enter in the gallery No. 2. A large diagram of the schematic section of excavated site at Vaishali, showing the important archaeological findings in chronological order, is an important exhibit of this gallery. Terracotta animal figurines like elephant, horse, bull, dog, monkey, snake, ram, birds etc are displayed in this gallery attracting visitors specially children. The miscellaneous objects like terracotta cart (assembled), rattle, weight, ball, dabber, skin rubber, moulds are also exhibited in this gallery. The beads made of terracotta and semi precious stones along with pendant, ear studs etc. indicates the high taste of ornamentation.

The terracotta toilet pan[9] datable to c. first-second century AD discovered from Vaishali is a unique specimen in the museum. The object is made for the use in a latrine. It is broken into three pieces. It is having two holes; one is for feces and second for urine. . It is also having embossed pair of flat footrest. It is also having the rim at the periphery, so water cannot be spread out of the pan during the rinsing. This terracotta toilet pan is rare of this kind and it may be considered earliest toilet pan from India.

In gallery No. 3, there are a large number of pots, potsherds and miniature pots of which a Northern Black Polished ware is remarkable for its shining glaze sometimes with golden shade. Pots have a variety of shapes like basin, bowl, dish, jar, handi and plate. This museum has a very rich collection of coins which includes the silver and copper punch marked coins, the copper cast coins and the Islamic coins of silver and copper which are displayed in a very effective manner. Copper objects like antimony rods, crucible, knife, nail, bell, and arrow-heads are also displayed in this gallery. The exhibit of an image of Vishnu is also noteworthy.

Other antiquities like antler, bone points, dice, casket, ivory objects, shell objects and terracotta seals and sealings, inscribed stone pedestal and image of Uma- Mahesvara in stone are displayed in gallery No. 4. An interesting brass image is showing Siva ling with snake canopy, Nandi, Ganesh, purohit and worshipper on a four legged pedestal. A brass image of Maitreya in *Rajlilasana* pose also is in display. Some noteworthy stone tablets depicting human figure, crescent, flower, dagger and honeysuckle motif also displayed in this gallery. The development chart of Devanagari script from 3rd century BC to 10th century AD is also a main attraction of this gallery.

The Archaeological Museum Vaishali is the prestigious site museum of India with vast collections in many disciplines. The museum strives to offer unparallel opportunities to the visitors for exploring and learning on diverse fields of art, culture and archaeology. A touch screen information kiosk with detailed information about the displayed objects as well as archaeological sites of Vaishali is also installed. Some rare photographs and translites showing the monuments and excavated remains of Vaishali also displayed for the visitors. A documentary film on the historical importance of Vaishali and the displayed objects of the museum is also screened regularly for the visitors. Visitors also invited to derive benefit from the brochures and leaflets of the museum. The rich collection of this museum enlivens the life style of ancient Vaishali and establishes that museum is not simply a collection of antiquities.

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Pl. 1. Archaeological Museum Vaishali.



Pl. 2. Brick tile depicting female head, 6th -7th cen. AD.



Pl. 3. Terracotta toilet pan, First-Second cen. AD.

Art, Archaeology and Museology

Volume : I

Editor

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B.R. Publishing Corporation

Delhi-110 052

Published by:

B.R Publishing Corporartion
425, Nimri Colony, Ashok Vihar, Phase-IV
Delhi-110 052
E-Mail : brpc73@gmail.com

First Published 2020

ISBN 9789388789479 (Set of 2 Vols.)

Printed at Anvi Composers, Delhi

Cataloging in Publication Data--DK
Courtesy: D.K. Agencies (P) Ltd. <docinfo@dkagencies.com>

Art, archaeology and museology / editor, Dilip Kumar.
pages cm
Contributed articles.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 9789388789479 (2 vols)

1. Art, Indic. 2. Art, Asian. 3. India--Antiquities. 4. Asia--Antiquities. 5. Museum techniques--India. 6. Museum techniques--Asia. I. Kumar, Dilip, 1986- editor.

LCC N7301.A78 2020 | DDC 709.54 23

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